

Changes to the S'pore family could see policy tweaks

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TODAY, 22 May 2015

Last year, for the first time ever, nuclear families — consisting of two parents living with their children — made up fewer than half of families here, and Social and Family Development Minister Tan Chuan-Jin signalled yesterday that this sobering statistic and other changes in family structures could prompt a re-examination of the way the Government crafts its policies.

In his first major speech as Social and Family Development Minister, Mr Tan reiterated the Government's guiding principle of the family as "the first line of care and support". However, fewer nuclear family households, small household sizes and more aged households could "portend greater challenges in marshalling immediate family support", he said.

"What happens then? Do we begin to also look at the extended family? If you don't have children, (but have) nieces, nephews, what does it mean? Should we begin to look at those relationships and how do we then — for example, from a Government policy perspective — support them?"

Between 2000 and last year, the proportion of nuclear families has fallen from 56 per cent to 49 per cent.

Over the same period, the proportion of one-person households increased from 8 per cent to 11 per cent, while the proportion of married couples who do not have any children or are not living with them rose from 11 per cent to 14 per cent. In terms of absolute numbers, the combined total of these two household types spiked by 80 per cent to about 300,000 households — far outstripping the 31 per cent growth in total number of resident households here from 915,000 to 1.2 million. Of the 300,000 households, about a third are aged households with at least one member who is 65 years old and above, said Mr Tan.

The minister was speaking at the second Social Service Partners Conference, which was held for the first time last year, was attended by 450 social service professionals, voluntary welfare organisations (VWO), academics and policymakers.

If policies were to be tweaked to include extended family members, experts at the conference suggested giving preference to relatives who are caring for elderly family members with no or few children when it comes to flat applications, for example. The Government could also make it easier for non-immediate family members to contribute to a person's Central Provident Fund accounts, as well as Medisave account to pay for medical bills.

Dr Mathew Mathews, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, said such policy tweaks would be a good way for people with few or no children to receive social support from the larger extended family network.

"That's where policies will come in ... We do know that people actually keep (in touch) with relatives (and) to further foster that would be useful," he said.

Ms Fazlinda Faroo, centre manager of PPIS Vista Sakinah, said it is timely to expand the definition of family beyond the traditional notion of biological parents and children. Doing so could help spur discussion on the long-term legal implications of changing family structures, she added.

“If my family members consist of my aunt, my cousins and my nieces ... (when) I fall sick, can my aunt support my medical expenses? What are the legal rights for her to do that for me? So these definitions of family will begin to allow us to also have conversations about the legal implications of what it means to be a family,” said Ms Faroo.

While she felt that there would not be answers in the short term on how policies could evolve, there should be discussions because society will have to be more inclusive, she said.

National University of Singapore sociologist Paulin Straughan welcomed the idea of making it easier for extended kin to help vulnerable relatives. “But we should not expand the definition of family to facilitate broadening the social safety net ... (to the extent) where it becomes a liability to be connected to a person,” she said.

Stressing the need for Singaporeans to remain socially engaged in their golden years, she said: “Part of preparing for a successful ‘third age’ includes more than financial adequacy. It includes more than taking good care of yourself. It also includes taking care of yourself socially and ... to be able to nurture social relationships.”